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ABSTRACT

Expressiveness in language is necessary for effective communication in every field. Prose should be effective not only in literature but also in science, business, law, and other specialized fields. Writing institutes across the country specialize in a new pedagogy for teaching expository prose, and one of the chief instruments for clarifying this pedagogy to university educators in the arts and sciences is a faculty development workshop. Such a workshop should offer a session on the role of expressiveness in referential writing, with "expressive" referring to the connotative and emphatic qualities of discourse. The session should use prose examples to demonstrate (1) expressiveness in language; (2) the need for precision in the location of words; (3) the importance of clarity, brevity, and rhythm; and (4) the nature of expository efficiency in technical writing. Writing instructors across the curriculum should be aware of the role played by the expressive elements of language--connotative diction, metaphor, figures of speech, emphatic word placement, and clear rhythmic syntax--in making writing precise, informative, and full of communication. (AEA)

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From Expression to Fact:
The Role of Expressiveness in Referential Writing*

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I would like to announce an axiom; it's my axiom, and quite possibly no one will agree with it. Still, as a "poor thing, but mine own," I would like permission to explore some of its implications.

The axiom is simply, "There is no excuse for poor writing."

I can clarify this abrupt statement by saying it another way: When mature professionals address their audience, they have a responsibility to use effective and attractive prose. I ask for effective prose because lack of it is destructive to any enterprise, and I ask for attractive prose because no one has the right to inflict ugliness on another person.

It can be objected that what is attractive in poetry is likely to be suspect in business reports, and what is effective writing in science may sound clumsy and flat in ears ex-

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pecting the graces of the personal essay. This charge needs to be admitted, and accordingly I will adjust my axiom. Let it now read, "Once we allow for the complexities of an author's purpose and for the particular requirements of his matter, there is no excuse for poor prose." My rule is no longer so absolute, but it may be more useful. Besides, I am happy to observe that my axiom puts me in the good company of E.D. Hirsch, when he speaks of "relative readability" as part of good writing.[1]

We can see that scientific writing with its primary aim of accurately reporting facts and processes may have little room for eloquence and grace. To the scientist, passion, like bias, must be denied lest data be skewed and verification damaged. James Kinneavy says in The Theory of Discourse that he "is inclined to agree with J. Robert Oppenheimer, in claiming that the language of science is now 'almost impossible to translate' into conventional lay language."[2] I am reminded of a friend in engineering who deals with waves of high frequency. He told me once that he subscribes to a magazine which deals with high and low wave frequencies, but that he could read only those articles which dealt with his specialty, the high frequencies. Well, if the languages of scientific sub-disciplines are so arcane that near neighbors cannot understand each other, then there is little reason for the layman to hope to understand either one of them.

Business is another field which has developed a code offering problems to the outsider. But here the businessman's problem is modified by his need to sell to the public. He may

not talk only to members of his own pride; he needs must also talk to us. That is why businessmen are always coming to the colleges in search of students who have verbal fluency, i.e., who can write. Yet the memo sent inter-office, the job description, the field report estimating the commercial possibilities of a downtown corner in St. Louis, the recommendations that flow from the lower floors to the upper realms are frequently couched in a telegraphic, time saving, code-worded, purely additive syntax very difficult for the non-businessman to read.

In dealing with legal writing, insurance policies and contracts, we have all become accustomed to monotonous, boring language which repeats nouns rather than use pronouns, to sentences which consist of endless qualifying clauses linked to the basic clause like a sausage. Such syntax has been accepted by both those who write and those who must sign the policy or contract as necessary to comprehensiveness. In law, as many of us know to our sorrow, no loopholes may be left.

Now it is clear that all these tongues, these codes, are needed. It is not for English Departments to say to diverse users of language that they all are philistines and barbarians. Or at least, such name calling ought not occur without the caller taking into account the peculiar requirements of each field. But after those needs are met, it is still true that for science, or law, or business, or any other specialized field, to use inefficient prose is necessarily to dilute at best, and at worst, to distort the content of

their communications. We, the public, the lay persons, cannot afford to go wrong in such fields, we cannot afford to be driven away from them by boredom and alienation, or, even worse, allow writers to mislead us through obfuscation. The words of Orwell from "Politics and the English Language" remain to haunt us: "... if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." What this means to me is that every one who writes, in whatever field and discipline, every one who publishes, by that act incurs the moral responsibility to communicate as directly and vividly as possible. It is also my belief that direct, effective communication is inherently attractive. Are we not all aware of the elegance of mathematics? A well done proof has its intrinsic beauty, so also does a well stated proposition, a well argued case.

The reverse is also true: given aim and matter, the more attractive we make our use of the language, whether it be through clarity of syntax, or through appositeness of diction; through cadence of the line or through balance of the elements; through happy collocations of consonants, or through the simple force of a plainly enunciated truth, the more we strive directly for attractiveness of written prose, the more we achieve greater congruency to content and greater effectiveness in communication.

Now how is this to be achieved? Well, opportunity is staring us in the face. A move is on across the country; a new pedagogy for teaching expository prose has arisen, more a phoenix from the ancient rhetoric than a product of the jet age, but still it is here: programs for writing across the

curriculum, for peer editing, for treating students as beginners at writing, not as experts. The universities, colleges and high schools are becoming aware of the resources standing without their doors. We can use this moment to fight for beauty and grace in all and any writing; English departments need not and should not abandon their traditional concern with fine writing. Rather they should expand that concern until every field, every department, insists that its students write a prose they can be proud of.

Where, we may ask, are the tools of implementation to be found? Well, they are here in this Institute, all packaged for us to cart away. No, that metaphor won't do. I have just been through the Beaver College Summer Institute, and I have to say that I was drenched in the tools of implementation. I was immersed, so to speak, in the instructive element, and I am very aware of just how much is available to us. We have a battery of philosophical approaches and principles deriving from the great ancients and from the Renaissance, reanimated for us by Kenneth Burke, Edward Corbett, James Kinneavy, Frank D'Angelo, E.D. Hirsch, Richard Young, Ross Winterow and James Moffat. Beyond these primary figures there are a host of explorers and mentors such as Kenneth Bruffee, Linda Flower, John Richard Hayes, James Brittain, Janet Emig, Mina Shaughnessy and Peter Elbow who in their books and by practice help us explore such immediately useful pedagogical devices as free writing, brain storming, multiple drafting, collaborative learning and problem solving. As you know, an enormous amount of

this material has just been organized and synthesized for direct classroom use in Writing in the Arts and Sciences (Cambridge, Mass.: Withrop Publishers, Inc. 1981) by Elaine Maimon, et al.[3]

Opportunity is knocking, the tools and materials are laid out, let us begin to employ them. Since the particular interest of this paper is awakening all writers to the need for fusing utility and beauty, let us look at one of the chief instruments for educating our colleagues, the faculty development workshop, and see what can be done there.

When I return to Bucknell University this fall, the Composition Council, to which I belong, will set up a series of faculty workshops designed to review precisely the same kind of issues, information and procedures that this Institute has so ably introduced us to. In Bucknell's Faculty Workshops on the Teaching of Exposition the participants and leaders will be drawn from a number of disciplines. The procedures will emphasize the practice and knowledge of writing that the participants already possess. The various sessions will be conducted through exercises stressing the commonness of our endeavor and the mutuality of the learning process. One afternoon will be devoted to the role of expressiveness in referential writing. It is at this aspect of the workshop which I wish to look now.

First, I should say that I use "expressive" to refer to the connotative and emphatic qualities of discourse. I do not see that such qualities are delimited even though they may be affected by aim, audience, matter or genre. To me,

expressive writing is equally as involved with persuation as with exploration of the self. Expressive language can not only express the author, but also the thing or process being described. I am cheered in this endeavor by a remark James Kinneavy made last week when he assured me that in his view expressiveness is always appropriate if difficult to achieve.

In this session of the workshop, I will try to enhance the participants' sense of expressiveness in language and the role it plays in completeness of communication. I ask the members to play with a number of exercises which in various ways show how better words and more exact syntax do a better job of informing the reader. Here is one exercise I will use. It begins with the first four lines of Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud":

> I wandered lonely as a cloud
> That floats on high o'er vales and hills
> When all at once I saw a crowd,
> A host, of golden daffodils;

I ask what happens if, in the fourth line, we change golden to yellow. Not then, "A host, of golden daffodils," but "A host, of yellow daffodils." The participants can notice that the rhythm remains unchanged since both words have two syllables, and each word stresses the first; they can further notice that the two words share much the same musical quality since both have sounds expressed by l and o. Finally, both words possess a strong visual quality gained by naming particular colors. When I ask, what has been lost by the change? the discussion may bring out the following points:

gold not only names a color but a precise shade of it granting connotations otherwise not available to us. For example, "golden daffodils" suggest beauty more emphatically than "yellow" since it is hard to think of golden as ugly. Golden also suggests rarity and preciousness, neither of which connotation arises by itself.

Finally, golden suggests warmth through its association with such phrases as "golden youth," "golden afternoons," or "golden lads and lasses." Where yellow simply describes, golden involves a metaphor wherein the mind is brought to perceive relationships. In undertaking that task, we become more deeply involved with the poem, lending ourselves more creatively to it. We may also perceive that by choosing golden over yellow, Wordsworth has wrought a communication, not only more evocative and moving, but also more exact and informative.

Here is another example: Consider the line from the Book of Common Prayer: "God grant us the grace fearlessly to struggle agains evil." The word grace, a gift only God can bestow, more powerfully suggests His intervention than would strength or courage, since they can arise from other sources. Furthermore, the echoing of the gr in grant by the gr of grace pulls their meanings together, both reinforcing the point of God's role and adding the gentle persuasiveness of verbal music. I would particularly point to the placement of fearlessly. "God grant us grace fearlessly to struggle against evil." To place this adverb between to and struggle or after struggle, as in: "God grant us grace to fearlessly struggle against evil," or "God grant us grace to struggle fearlessly against evil," is to lose the force of emphatic placement. We would notice that muc

expressive exactness and power is lost if writers are not aware of the need for precision in the location of words.

Let us now look at an exercise dealing with standard legal prose. Here is a selection from page 66 of the 1959 edition of the Laws of Pennsylvania, volume I. Let me make several points first. The definition concerns liability in car accidents and is all one sentence, yet it is not really a sentence because it has no verb. The opening words go like this: "'Proof of Financial Responsibility.' -- Proof of ability to respond . . . . " So what we have is a sentence fragment of 118 words defining who is responsible in car accidents and for how much. The passage is constructed by adding to the predicate clause a series of phrases and clauses beginning with either a preposition or with "and." The resulting passage looks rather like a sausage, a series of links. Notice how difficult it is to understand this passage, even after its subject matter and several of its characteristics have been pointed out:

> 'Proof of Finacial Responsibility.' -- Proof of ability to respond in damages for liability on account of accidents occurring subsequent to the effective date of said proof, arising out of ownership, maintenance or use of a motor vehicle in the amount of ten thousand dollars ($10,000.00) because of bodily injury to or death of one (1) person in any one accident, and, subject to said limit for one (1) person in the amount of twenty thousand dollars

($20,000.00) because of bodily injury to or death of two (2) or more persons in any one accident, and in the amount of five thousand dollars ($5,000.00) because of injury to or destruction of property of others in any one accident.

The difficulty of understanding this passage, I think, is plain. Consider what a disservice is afforded to the citizen governed by a law whose wording creates the very confusion that wording is intended to prevent. Here is a revised version, striving for greater clarity, brevity, and rhythm.

"Proof of Financial Responsibility" -- Proof requires that the owners, maintainers and users of motor vehicles establish their ability to pay legal damages caused by their vehicles; for each accident, damages can be assessed up to the following amounts: for bodily injury or the death of one (1) person, ten thousand dollars ($10,000.00); for the bodily injury or death of two (2) or more persons, twenty thousand ($20,000.00); for damage to the property of others, five thousand dollars ($5,000.00).

This version has only eighty words and is thirty-two percent shorter than the original passage. The brevity is achieved by altering the conditions of owning, maintaining and using into the active agents, owners, maintainers and users. This change makes it possible to get rid of the round-about unanchored syntax which requires clumsy qualification to connect these con-

ditions to an object. The change creates greater clarity of cause and effect, thus establishing where responsibility lies. I also broke the whole long running passage of the original into two independent clauses whose subordinate elements are firmly anchored. The result of these changes is brevity, clarity and force. It has, I feel, a certain daunting quality which arises from stating a list of punishments in simple, parallel syntax which hammers home the point in vigorous cadences. There never was any intrinsic reason for the original passage to be so obscure.

The workshop will deal with one more area, that of science. Any text concerned with biology needs to explain the key processes of mitosis and meiosis clearly and briefly as possible. However, the amount of space different texts use varies enormously from a few lines to twenty pages. Presumably the amount is based on the central interests of the text. But in any case clarity of presentation is essential plus a certain minimum coverage. The excerpt here comes from a text, recently published by a major press, which is designed to "be suitable and relevant for students working on introductory animal science . . . ." The section dealing with mitosis and meiosis is very short, only 149 words. It comes from a chapter called, "Reproduction, Breeding, and Heredity," which is eighty pages long. I have chosen it partly because it is short enough that it can be comfortably handled in this paper, but also because it lends itself very easily to questions of expository efficiency.

Mitosis is a process of cell division that takes

place in growth areas of the body producing new cells or to replace dying cells. The daughter cells are identical to the parent cells. The process is a continuous one, lasting about an hour, and for convenience is described as having four stages (prophase, metaphase, anaphase, and telophase). The mechanics of how the chromosomes are distributed during the division stages is not relevant here, but can be checked out in any introductory biology text.

Meiosis is a process of cell division that is confined to sex organs (testis, ovary). Sex cells (gametes) are produced as a result of meiosis. These cells, unlike those produced by the growth divisions, are not identical to the parent cells. The chromosome number is halved (haploid). This for good reason, because sex cells combine at fertilization to return to the original parent duplicate (diploid) number.

The eighty-three words used to describe mitosis communicate only that it is a process producing cells identical to the parent cell which takes about an hour. The section on meiosis has sixty-six words saying that the process is limited to sex cells and produces gametes which have only half the original number of chromosomes so that fertilization restores the full number. In my paraphrase the section on mitosis has fifteen words and is 82% shorter than the original. The section on meiosis has twenty-seven words and is 60% shorter than the original. The two sections put together have forty-two words

as opposed to 149 and is 72%. Actually the author did better in his glossary.

It is, of course, possible to give the student a good deal more information in the same space than does this text. I can see no reason for not doing so since the space is obviously there to be used. The students are studying a chapter dealing with breeding and heredity. Here is a rewrite:

> In mitosis a body cell divides by four stages. In prophase the centrioles separate, moving to opposite sides of the cell as a spindle of microtubules simultaneously forms between them. In metaphase the chromosomes, having doubled before mitosis begins, shift to the equator of the spindle, where, during anaphase, half of each pair moves to one of the opposed centrioles. In telophase, the chromosomes become diffuse, and the cytoplasm divides, producing two cells whose chromosomes are identical in number and kind to those of the original.
>
> Meiosis is limited to reproductive cells of the ovaries and testis which divide twice forming gametes or haploid cells with only half their chromosomes. In prophase and metaphase, the chromosomes from each parent join up, remaining together during anaphase when half their number randomly move to each centriole, thus assuring that any future union of gametes will form a diploid cell with the full number of chromosomes, but with a different assortment of genes. (160 words)

The new passage is 6% longer than the original, but it includes a brief description of the actual processes whose de-

tails the first passage asks the student to look for elsewhere, wasting twenty-six words doing so. The original suffers from disconnected sentences and facts, the resulting jumpiness leaving it to the student to add the details up. The rewrite not only brings the student more information, but also makes as many connections and subordinations of the material as is likely. In short, the space is used, the words are earned.

The rewrite also has a sense of direction and cycle, qualities necessary to sound understanding of mitosis and meiosis. The words might have been kept down to the exact number of the original, but I can not find any way to cut without losing clarity of syntax and effectiveness of subordination. I also find the length necessary to gain rhythm and cadence which are important clarifiers of the order of detail. Shortened, the passage would have lost the sense of events following deliberately one after the other. It was worth those eleven words to keep these qualities for they are the heighteners of communication efficiency.

For a last example of expression in referential prose, the workshop will examine a passage from a major scientific work. Here is a selection from On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals by William Harvey, written in 1628. Notice how the author employs the first person, metaphors, figurative language, and emotive, value-laden words. The powerful sweep of syntax is, of course, partly due to Robert Willis, translator from the Latin:

"And similarly does it come to pass in the body, through the motion of the blood, that the various parts are nourished, cherished, quickened by the warmer, more perfect, vaporous, spirituous, and, as I may say, alimentive blood; which, on the other hand, owing to its contact with these parts, becomes cooled, coagulated, and, so to speak, effete. It then returns to its sovereign the heart, as if to its source, or to the inmost home of the body, there to recover its state of excellence or perfection. Here it renews its fluidity, natural heat, and becomes powerful, fervid, a kind of treasury of life, and impregnated with spirits, it might be said with balsam. Thence it is again dispersed. All this depends on the motion and action of the heart.

The heart, consequently, is the beginning of life; the sun of the microcosm, even as the sun in his turn might well be designated the heart of the world; for it is the heart by whose virtue and pulse the blood is moved, perfected, and made nutrient, and is preserved from corruption and coagulation; it is the household divinity which, discharging its function, nourishes, cherishes, quickens the whole body, and is indeed the foundation of life, the source of all action . . . . "

The point of this session of the workshop will be to help writing instructors across the curriculum alert their students to the role expressive elements of language -- connotative diction, metaphor, figures of speech, emphatic word

placement, and clear rhythmic syntax -- can play in making writing more precise, more informative, and more full of communication than does flat language, indifferent word placement, and loose syntax devoid of force and direction. If the instructors of the current generation of students can help them toward mastery of a suppler syntax and language than any we have striven for so far, we may be able to produce eventually lawyers, doctors, engineers, scientists, and business men who are clear not only to their peer, but also to us, the citizen.

Expressiveness in language is not a luxury to be relegated to belles lettres; it is necessary for effective communication in every field. I return to my axiom, hoping that it will not sound so arbitrary now: for the professional in any field, there is no excuse for poor writing.

Acknowledgements

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Footnotes

[1] The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 85.

[2] (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1980), p. 74.

[3] (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1981).